

**Commissioning Ceremony**  
**USS LENA S. HIGBEE (DDG 123)**  
**13 MAY 2023, Key West, FL**  
RDML C. A. KUEHNER

GOOD MORNING - When you have been asked to deliver the principal remarks at the commissioning ceremony for our Navy's newest warship, AND you will follow the Chief of Naval Operations AND the Secretary of the Navy, you do what *every* Navy Nurse knows to do in ANY personal moment of anticipation and exhilaration... you take a deep breath, in through your nose, and out through your mouth...you check your own pulse.... and *then* you COMMIT! That is where I find myself, in this moment, making history, with each of you. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and Admiral Gilday, for your trust, and this honor.

Distinguished Guests, Ship's Sponsors, Captain, Crew, living descendants of LENA SUTCLIFFE HIGBEE, and ALL present – here, to witness the commissioning of this *mighty*, **NAVY Warship**...Welcome – and AGAIN, GOOD MORNING!

And to our *Nation's* beloved Navy Nurse Corps, HAPPY BIRTHDAY! At *only* 115 YEARS young, **YOU** are one of the *greatest* enhancements to the **fighting strength** of our Navy, over the past 247 years of its rich history.

**Today** marks my last day, as the 26<sup>th</sup> Director of the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps. I - and the nearly 4,000 active and reserve professionals I represent - will forever feel connected to this moment in history, and words cannot fully express our gratitude for our presence and representation. Thank you.

On this day, I recognize that **I** am here, in **no small part**, **BECAUSE** of the vision, initiative, and conspicuous achievements of this GREAT Warship's namesake. Two years ago, along with many here today, I was present for her Christening, and today feels like a VERY warm and *welcome* family reunion.

In 1908, **Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee** earned her position as one of the original “**Sacred Twenty**” Navy Nurses, establishing our Corps. As the second Superintendent, she led the Navy Nurse Corps with

awe-inspiring distinction; and this morning we **celebrate HER** legacy; and in **honoring** her selfless service, we ensure that the *permanence* of her **spirit** is breathed into every space and crevasse of this magnificent vessel, as she comes to life.

The story of Lenah Higbee *is* the story of *past, present, and future* Navy Nurses, and the undeniable, inseparable role of the Navy Nurse in defense of our Nation. Lenah Higbee understood, in the context of War and a pandemic that nursing's presence – ***on the front and in the fight***, is as essential to victory, as any other element of modern warfighting.

With uncommon vision *and* valor, Superintendent Higbee pursued ***credible standing*** for the *all-female* Navy Nurse Corps, fighting ***within*** the institution, ***against*** overt discrimination and ***for*** the common, basic features of military service, including pay, rank, housing, and even uniforms. I am personally grateful, and we are in a better place in our Navy, *because* of the efforts of Lenah Higbee, former Navy Secretary - the Honorable Ray Maybus, as well as our

current Navy Secretary and CNO, who continue to champion, in both policy and advocacy, the rich opportunities available to all who commit to naval service.

LENAH HIGBEE anticipated the insatiable need for nursing care, and through strategic partnership, ensured that a surge of 8,000 Red Cross nurses would be trained, immunized, and battle-ready for immediate mobilization and available to the returning casualties of World War I.

LENAH HIGBEE's nurses proved their competence *and* their mettle, bearing full witness to the unspeakable horrors of warfare, while rendering compassionate care to the ill, gravely injured, and mortally wounded. Today we look to our future similarly, alongside our medical colleagues, with comparable drive and determination. And just as our Fleet, we adapt and evolve rapidly, to meet the now and future challenges we face together, **unified**, in mission purpose.

In his remarks, Admiral Gilday anchored on Lenah's undeniable commitment and call to authentic service. Today, in the crisis of a

national nursing shortage, Navy Nurses hear that **same** call and continue to be moved and inspired to serve. Nurses today have any number of options for employment. Those who choose a career in this uniform make the same authentic commitment that Lenah did. Service is indeed enough. It is certainly why I am still here.

Lenah Higbee was only 37 years old when she began her 11-year tenure as the Superintendent of the fledgling Navy Nurse Corps. Her husband, a Lt Colonel in the USMC died the same year. In 1908, Lenah could have faded quietly into life as a serviceman's widow. *Instead*, she **FOUGHT** to serve, in her own right, and in her time, it was with eyes wide open, facing challenge and sacrifice, both known and unknown. Yet she persisted and prevailed.

I was the same age as Lenah, and a Lieutenant Commander, when I deployed to Fallujah, Iraq as a family nurse practitioner, medical augmentee, and the Senior Nurse of Bravo surgical Company. During the months of intense fighting, at the frontlines of military operations, our hundred-person team rendered round-the-clock care

to countless wounded Marines, soldiers, allies, and those unfortunate innocents, caught in the cross-hairs of war - including civilians, mothers, and their children.

There is no question that my experiences in Fallujah confirmed my resolve and career-long commitment to serve. The eight additional nurses on our team represented distinct nursing specialties and diverse clinical backgrounds. Each of us was utilized to our fully capacity and indelibly changed by our experiences.

Secretary Del Toro has acknowledged – and indeed, we do not know, what the crew of USS LENA HIGBEE (DDG 123) will face in the future. On behalf of **ALL** Navy Nurses, past, present, and future, I pledge to you, today, our faithful, enduring service and support. Present and accountable, Navy Nurses **have** and **will** rush toward the battle *with you*, answer *every* call, and deliver competent, compassionate care, *whatever* the mission, and *wherever* there is need, because **Lenah Higbee got it right!!**

Navy Nurses have served in every armed conflict, aboard ships, in the air, and on land, around the globe, responding to both war and humanitarian crisis and disaster relief. Navy Nurses have been held as enemy prisoners of war, and many have made the ultimate sacrifice to our nation during armed conflict operations.

During my own career, the build-up and surge deployments of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom employed thousands of military nurses. Navy Nurse deployments in support of OIF and OEF were in ways similar to Vietnam; that is, most of the nurses who deployed did so as individual augmentees, bringing leadership, innovation, and myriad nursing specialties to the battle fronts, caring for patients from the point of illness or injury, through aeromedical evacuation, and on into rehabilitation.

In the two decades spanning 1991-2020, just over 4,000 active component Navy Nurses, representing **ALL** Navy nursing specialties, met the call of our Nation, with cumulative “days deployed” totaling **2,192 years**. Our reserve forces were additive for the duration. The

COVID pandemic of *our* time represented our most recent surge demand, and Navy Nurses were again on the front lines, from medical departments on ships at sea, to overseas' hospitals' emergency rooms, and right here at home in makeshift care sites, and civilian medical facilities, augmenting the care for our citizenry. In 2022, nearly a quarter of our Navy nurses deployed, through relentless demand in both garrison and operational settings.

In the past TEN years, your Navy Nurse Corps has rapidly evolved and adapted, just like the Fleet, along with science, technology, and highly specialized education and skills to meet all demands, in the rapidly-changing and complex domains of our global service environment. In 2011, only 23 of our Navy Nurses had earned their Doctorate degree. The Doctoral level of education is now the academic *standard* for many of our advanced practice nurses. In one short decade, over 230 nurses have now earned their Doctorate degree – representing a 10-fold increase - AND 33% of the Navy Nurse Corps currently holds a Masters degree or above.



While these data are undeniable and impressive, the most important attributes of your Navy Nurse Corps are not so easily described or quantified. I am referencing the **core essence**, the substance, and the **HEART** of your Basic Model Navy Nurse. I am referencing the intimate moments between patient and nurse, where incalculable joy, pain, suffering, healing, health, hope, fear, acceptance, indeed *any* aspect of humanity you might describe, exists, surrounded by the warm calming comfort of compassion, empathy, and care.

- It is looking into the eyes of a mortally wounded Marine, as he is whisked away to the operating room, knowing that in the next 24 hours – humble & somber service brothers or sisters will deliver the worst possible news to a family
- It is caring for a laboring mother, and then comforting her and her spouse, as they reconcile the facts of a premature birth and begin to manage their unspeakable loss and grief
- It is acknowledging the stress and isolation of a prolonged at-sea period, when your shipmate is in crisis, and you listen, hold a hand, and cry together, without judgment.

These are the qualities which undergird and inspire each Navy Nurse's loyal dedication to **every** patient, **every** hour, **every** day, without rest or respite from the obligations of selflessness and personal sacrifice. Truly, I am describing the same selfless **service** *and* **substance** embodied in Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee and her charge to our original Navy Nurses. It is unfailing, and it persists.

Every Navy Nurse owes Lenah our gratitude. Through her vision, she established the foundational tenets of our Corps, transcendent through time, and palpable still today. Your Navy Nurses are laser-focused, to achieve competency at each level of education and practice, to prioritize operational readiness as their highest obligation, and to preserve the commitment to building capacity for the future fight.

LENAH HIGBEE recognized and permanently established the sacred duty of Navy nurses to train our Hospital Corpsmen - knowing that their competent application of nursing skills would extend the

reach of lifesaving care to distant battle sites. This duty has never diminished.

As I stand here before you, a direct descendent of LENA HIGBEE'S Navy Nurse Corps "leadership lineage", I remain humbled and inspired. With integrity, pride, and *determined action*, I commit to all – as she did before me – Our Navy Nurse Corps Officers stand *ready and alongside*; we fearlessly go into harm's way, *with* and *for* our brothers and sisters in arms, in faithful service to our nation. We care for the ill and the injured, wherever and whenever we are called. We lead *and prevail* - through every challenge and *any* adversity.

Superintendent Higbee's legacy is an heroic account of a fearless pioneer, a leader among men and women, an advocate and agent for necessary change, a visionary, a teacher, a scholar, a scientist, an author, an innovator, a strategist, a Navy Nurse.

The Officers and Crew of LENA HIGBEE (DDG 123), will come to know, and be inspired by Lenah Higbee's

relentless strength, as they embrace and embody her spirit. I share your inspiration - for all that she ***IS*** and has yet to become... Make no mistake, LENA H SUTCLIFFE HIGBEE *will* care for you. She will honor you by her name, and in return, you will carry out your mission orders, with selfless service to our Nation – and in so doing, you will preserve her timeless and immortal legacy. *Bellatrix Illa* - She is **INDEED** a Warrior, and also, forever, a Navy Nurse!

THANK YOU!!!